

Paty Lopez-Pullman was tired. She says that after spending up to nine hours each day at the elementary school as a social worker, she would drive herself home, pick up her kids, then shuttle them to sports practice or piano lessons. She also spent one evening a week volunteering at her church, and ran a side business selling beauty products out of her home. To keep up with all her responsibilities, she forced herself to work late into the night—often until 3 or 4 a.m. Although she and her husband shared basic household duties, taking turns preparing meals and cleaning the house, she said, 'nearly every night I would put the kids to bed and then head to my home office, doing paperwork or catching up on laundry.'" She described her life as feeling like she was "creeping through life in a fog of fatigue."

Does that sound familiar to anyone? If not the exact details, how about the feeling of being overworked, over-burdened? If not by your schedule, perhaps by debt, unemployment, heavy responsibilities? Even kids today feel it – with heavy homework loads and expectations to achieve. We're fortunate in many ways in our culture, but we also pay the price in stress-related illnesses, addictions, burnout, and simply the 'fog of fatigue.'

I saw a picture of a woman from Ethiopia. She's carrying a bundle of firewood. The caption describes the scene: "the higher we went the more women and girls we passed carrying loads of firewood back down the mountain. Barefoot and bent over at the waist, these women carried 75-pound bundles of eucalyptus saplings, 7-feet wide, down to the city center about 10 miles away. These firewood carriers are a common sight, so much so that you can read about them in guidebooks like the *Lonely Planet*." (Show picture)

Now I don't intend to compare our privileged lifestyle in the West with that of the Third World. But this picture is such a vivid illustration of a bent-over woman. Without minimizing the oppressive conditions under which she lives, I see this bent-over woman and the bent-over woman of Luke's gospel as a metaphor for all the things that press down on us and weigh on us so heavily. For some it's crushing poverty or physical pain, for others it is the 'creeping fog of fatigue.' We may not be carrying 75-pound bundles of firewood down a mountain, but we don't want to minimize or dismiss the burdens we carry as irrelevant in the face of the world's suffering. Our burdens are our burdens. Sometimes I just have to admit that the bent-over woman is me; sometimes you just have to admit that the bent-over woman is you.

And then we turn to the gospel, to the good news. The good news for Paty Lopez-Pullman came from the gospel according to Oprah Winfrey. This month's *O* magazine features an energy makeover with personal trainer Jim Karas, author of *The 7 Day Energy Surge*, who says that Lopez-Pullman's exhaustion is part of an epidemic, that 80% of his clients say they need more energy.

That's a lot of bent-over people.

So what did this energy makeover involve? First, they diagnosed the problem as overcommitment. Then they worked on scaling down Lopez-Pullman's to-do list, and created a schedule that blocked out time for everything she had to accomplish.

Now up to this point, I'm with Oprah. I'm all in favor list-making and time management. But then for me, it went off the rails. Lopez-Pullman's next task was to start penciling in her non-negotiable commitments, like going to work, or driving the kids to soccer practice. Then, whatever time was left over - if any - could go to voluntary commitments, like attending a church meeting." So "Lopez-

Pullman scaled back where she could and now helps out with seasonal activities at church but not projects that demand her participation every week.

Now I get it, church meetings can be a complete waste of time. And we had better be sure that we make it worthwhile for people to come to one. To be fair, the article didn't say whether her once-a-week meeting was a Bible study or a discussion group. Frankly if it was a business meeting, then I'm with Oprah. But I'd hate to see an education or service project or spiritual growth group lumped in with weekly council meetings. And I realize it didn't say anything about cutting out Sunday worship time, although that is a place where many people do make a cut. It's easy to do. After all it isn't one of the non-negotiables.

Except – if we really do believe that in Jesus we see the power of God to raise people up from their burdens and set them free, then we have to ask if we really believe it for ourselves. And if we do – or even if we just want to believe it – then how do we tap into that power? How do we allow God's healing and enlivening power cut through our 'fog of fatigue'?

One very important way is by observing sabbath – not as adherence to a set of rules and regulations about it, but as a time of rest and renewal. Jesus knew this. The gospel according to Jesus is about more than time management, it's also about spirit enhancement.

But I'm afraid that we have lost the meaning of sabbath. I grew up in PA under the 'blue laws.' These were laws that enforced the observance of Sunday as a day of rest. This meant that stores were not open on Sunday. You had 6 other days to do your shopping; Sunday was sabbath time. I'm not advocating going back to those days. For one thing, how would we decide whose sabbath: Friday for Muslims, Saturday for Jews, or Sunday for Christians? However, by not having an enforced sabbath, it means that we have to be very intentional about taking sabbath time.

In *Provoking the Gospel of Luke*, Richard Swanson contrasts our modern approach to sabbath and the profound regard that the people of Jesus' time would have had for the day of rest: "This scene comes out of a world that remembered that Sabbath is different. Sabbath is not just a day of rest. It is a day of promise....Sabbath is welcomed into the house as a queen would be welcomed. Sabbath provides a foretaste of the culmination of all things, a glimpse of God's dominion, a little slice of the messianic age dropped into the midst of regular time. Sabbath offers a remembrance of God's promise of peace and freedom for all of creation. It is a good thing, a gift from God....Sabbath had become a symbol of the resistance God's people offered to tyrants of every sort and every time...Sabbath is a day that lifts people's eyes to God's promise in the midst of the most unpromising circumstances."

Wow! Now how can I create that kind of remembrance when I take my sabbath day on a Friday? How can you create that kind of awareness if you take some sabbath time on a Monday evening when everyone else is asleep? How can we create sabbath here on Sunday evenings? The worship planning committee (which does not meet every week) has read an article called *Why Do We Worship the Way We Have Always Worshipped When People Keep Changing?* There is one question at the very end that I think is the most important of all: "Do people encounter the Holy in our worship services?" Do we offer a place of sabbath rest and renewal? If we don't, we'd better start finding ways to do it.

I don't know what Paty Lopez-Pullman's commitment is as a follower of Jesus. She may have needed to give up that church committee. I've often said that we must be as mindful as we can of the time and energy limitations of our members. I've also said that discipleship is a commitment that is not always

easy. That sounds like a contradiction. What it is is a balancing act we all have to struggle with and set our priorities by.

The bent-over woman of Luke's gospel reminds us of our own burdens. But she also reminds us that as she was lifted up, so can we. 'Christian Science Monitor': wood carriers.

To live with both burden and joy is one of the challenges of discipleship. To serve with both burden and joy is one of the privileges of discipleship. In the words of Jesus: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Amen

Jeremiah 1:4-10

While the tasks to which Jeremiah is called in this text may seem to be primarily destructive, i.e., to pull up the "weeds" and to tear down the structures, to destroy that which is evil and to overthrow power structures, his work is also to be constructive, "to build and to plant." We see in this that the destructive and the constructive elements of his call are actually closely related. The planting and building occurs as the oppressive power structures are torn down.

Now the word of YHWH came to me and said:

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.

Before you were born I consecrated you.

I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then I said, "Ah, Lord God!

Truly I do not know how to speak; I am too young!"

But YHWH said,

"Do not say, 'I am too young.'

Now, go wherever I send you.

And say whatever I command you.

Do not fear anyone,

for I am with you to protect you.

It is YHWH who speaks."

Then YHWH touched my mouth and said to me,

"Look, I am putting my words in your mouth.

This day I appoint you

over nations and territories,

to uproot and to tear down,

to destroy and to overthrow,

to build and to plant."

Hebrews 12:18-29

The series of nearly consecutive readings from the Epistle to the Hebrews continues here. As elsewhere in this document, it is written here that the old, which in this instance is the people who were with Moses at Sinai, has been replaced by the new, which here is Jesus revealed in Zion, the Heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God, a symbol of the presence of God in Christ Jesus, the arbitrator of

a new Covenant.

What you have come to is nothing known to the senses: not a blazing fire, or a gloom turning to total darkness, or a storm, or trumpeting thunder, or even the great voice speaking such that those hearing beg that no more be said to them. They could not bear to hear the command, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that even Moses said, "I am terrified and trembling."

What you have drawn near to is Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, where innumerable angels have gathered for the festival with the whole church – in which everyone is a 'firstborn' and a citizen of heaven. You have come to God, the Supreme judge, and have been placed with the spirits of the holy ones who have been made perfect. You have come to Jesus - the mediator who brings a new Covenant - and to the sprinkled blood which pleads even more insistently than that of Abel.

Make sure that you never refuse to listen to the One who speaks. If the people who refused to listen to the warning while on earth didn't escape, how much less will we escape if we refuse to listen to the voice of warning that comes from heaven? God's voice shook the earth then, but now God promises, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."

That promise means that the things being shaken are created things, so that only those things that cannot be shaken will remain. Therefore, since we have inherited an unshakeable kingdom, let us thankfully worship God in a way that is acceptable – in reverence and in awe. For indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Luke 13:10-17

The old issue of how to mark the Sabbath surfaces once again in this text. And again as he often does, Luke places a woman at the centre of the story. One has to wonder if 'Luke' was, in fact, a well-educated woman like Lydia or Priscilla who concealed her identity behind an obviously male name and that of an obscure fellow traveler of Paul.

One Sabbath, Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues. There was a woman there who for eighteen years had a sickness caused by a spirit. She was bent double and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are free of your infirmity." He laid his hands on her, and immediately she stood up straight and began thanking God.

The head of the synagogue, indignant that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the congregation, "There are six days for working. Come on those days to be healed, not on the Sabbath."

Jesus said in reply, "You hypocrites! Which of you does not let your ox or your donkey out of the stall on the Sabbath to give it water? This daughter of Abraham and Sarah has been in the bondage of Satan for eighteen years. Shouldn't she have been released from her shackles on the Sabbath?"

At these words, all his opponents were put to shame; meanwhile everyone else rejoiced at the marvels Jesus was accomplishing.

